

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana Building

AGENDA ITEM: B

OWNERS: Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana (SMOM)

HPO FILE NO: 18PL161

APPLICANT: CJ Ortiz-Alves, SMOM

DATE ACCEPTED: Nov-25-2017

LOCATION: 5804 Canal Street – Second Ward

HAHC HEARING: Jan-25-2018

SITE INFORMATION: 5804 Canal St, Block 3, Tracts 6A & 7A, Fullerton Place, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a two-story stucco commercial building on the southeast corner of Canal and Norwood Streets.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana (SMOM) Building at 5804 Canal Street was completed circa 1946. SMOM, a community organization formed in 1932 to assist families of Mexican heritage during times of crisis, purchased the building in 1978 for its offices. Previous owners and tenants include Model Pharmacy, the Pipe Fitters Local, and the Seafarers Union.

The two-story, Art-Moderne stucco commercial building has a series of storefront windows on the first floor with an upcurved awning, similar to the ones present on the River Oaks Shopping Center, and features original metal casement windows, glass block, and pigmented structural glass on the second floor. The main entrance sits at the chamfered corner facing the intersection of Norwood and Canal Streets. The second-floor former union hall serves as an event space for the community.

The building is located directly across Canal Street from the Continental Can Company and Leo Tanguma's mural, "Rebirth of our Nationality." The mural, painted in 1973, is "a powerful symbol of identity to generations of Houstonians of Mexican-American heritage" and lends a fitting context to the SMOM building.

The building is representative of the commercial development in Houston's East End that accompanied the area's rapid industrialization during and after World War II. The building has also long been associated with the organized labor movement and the development of Houston's Mexican-American community in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana Building is significant for its architecture and local cultural influence, and meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 6, and 8 for Protected Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Previous Ownership

In 1946, the building was assessed under the owner Joseph O. Sills, a local barber in Second Ward. City Directories show Sills' shop on the next block at 5912 Canal Street in 1940. Sills was also listed as the owner of a small one-story store that was built on the same property as the building at 5804 Canal, but that building was torn down in 1956 under the ownership of the Pipe Fitters Local Union #211.

Throughout the 1950s, Model Pharmacy, which moved from 1802 Louisiana Street, was the major tenant of the building. In 1951, the Pipe Fitters Local Union #211 moved into the second storefront, beginning the building's long association with labor unions. The Seafarers International Union of North America and Marine Engineers Beneficial Association occupied the building through the 1970s until the Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana purchased the building in 1978.

Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana (SMOM)

The Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana (Mutual Society for Mexican Workers) was founded in 1932 after Jesús Sánchez, a local shoemaker, was run over by a truck, and his family was unable to pay the thirty dollars in funeral expenses to send his body back to Mexico. To prevent his burial in a pauper's grave, friends and neighbors pooled their resources and collected over thirty-five dollars for the family. A group of men decided to establish a permanent mutual-aid society in Second Ward that would financially assist its members with medical emergencies and funerary expenses. The Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana was the second mutual-aid society in Houston. Whenever a member had financial troubles, the others sold tamales and organized community suppers to raise money. To maintain a sense of brotherhood, members prohibited the discussion of politics at their meetings. Membership was limited to men, but their wives and daughters participated in organizing dances and preparing the food served at community suppers and fund-raisers.

On July 30, 1987, SMOM became a registered 501 (c) 3 organization in Houston and continued to focus on commemorative events (centennial, festivals, pageants, etc.) as a means of generating funds while providing medical care services and aide to the homeless, low-income families, handicapped citizens, senior citizens, veterans, and anyone in need in the East End community. Other services have evolved including helping in disaster relief for hurricanes and earthquakes, health and wellness programs, ballet de folklorico classes for all ages, music lessons, continuing education classes, and seasonal food and toy/clothing drives. Special events that highlight, educate, and celebrate Hispanic heritage include Thanksgiving in the Barrio (since 1986), Navidad en el Barrio (since 1986), Cinco de Mayo, Fiesta Patrias, Día de Los Muertos, and Día del Niño.

Some major contributions and accomplishments of SMOM include:

- Donated to and fundraised for the victims of the Texas City Explosion in April 1947.
- Participated in the Foley's Thanksgiving Day Parade in 1957 (25th Anniversary of the formation of SMOM).
- Donated food, medicine and money to the victims of an earthquake in Central America in 1977.
- Served as collection center for hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Ike (2008).

- Housed the Volunteers of America Home Delivered Meals Program for homebound elderly.
- Partnered with HPD for crime-prevention seminars.
- Partnered with the Houston Parks and Recreation Dept. for the Summer Youth Lunch program.

Refugio Gómez

Refugio Gómez (1905-1988) was a founding member of SMOM, a Mexican immigrant, and a community leader. Gómez was elected the society's first secretary, and was a lifetime member. He was born on July 4, 1905, in Aguascalientes, Mexico. His mother died when he was a young boy, and in 1913, he and his father moved to New Mexico, where his father had been recruited by United States government contractors to work in coal mines. Miners in New Mexico had gone on strike, and strikebreakers were hired from Texas and Mexico to ensure a steady production of coal throughout World War I. Refugio attended school in Gallup, New Mexico, through the eighth grade. In 1920, he and his father moved to Rockdale, Texas, where they worked in the coal industry. In 1925 his father was pinned underneath a coal wagon and killed. Gómez later moved to Houston and settled in Second Ward.

In Houston, he worked as a ditch digger, a street paver, and a salesman. During the harvest seasons of 1927 and 1928, he picked sugar beets in Michigan. Many new opportunities became available during World War II, and Gómez became a welder in the Houston shipyards. During the next several years he was continually hired and fired by the shipyards; Mexican laborers were the first hired when there was a shortage of labor and the first fired when the employment crisis was over. In 1948, Gómez was hired as a ship engineer, a position he held for the next twenty-seven years.

Gómez belonged to other *sociedades mutualistas*, including the Unión Fraternal, the Sociedad Morelos, and the Sociedad Moctezuma. During the 1960s, he joined the Viva Kennedy clubs and became one of the charter members of the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations in Harris County. He spoke as a Democrat on behalf of various candidates at rallies and on the radio, in both English and Spanish. He was also a tireless worker in the ongoing campaign to get Mexican-Americans to register and vote.

On the forty-sixth anniversary of the Sociedad Obrera Mexicana, Gómez was awarded a certificate for being the oldest living member. He helped found the Federación de Sociedades Mutualistas Mexicanas de Texas, a statewide federation of mutual-aid societies in the state. Beginning in 1964, he attended the annual conference of the Federación Nacional de Mutualistas de México. Gómez was a member of the Zaragoza Society and represented it at celebrations in Puebla, Mexico, where he was asked to place flowers on Gen. Ignacio S. Zaragoza's grave. He influenced the governor of Puebla, Alfredo Toxqui Fernández de Lara, to commission a statue of Zaragoza for Goliad, Texas. In September 1980, the ten-foot statue was dedicated and placed in Goliad State Park.

Gómez retired from his job as ship engineer in 1975. He died in 1988. He was survived by his second wife, whom he had married in 1939, and eleven children.

Second Ward

As early as the 1840s, Second Ward extended from the center of downtown Houston, at the northeast corner of Main Street and Congress Avenue, and extended eastward to the city limits. During the twentieth century, the cultural and geographic heart of the neighborhood became more closely identified with the area bound by Buffalo Bayou to the north, Houston Belt and Terminal Railways to the south and east, and downtown to the west. Second Ward is one of Houston's four original neighborhoods.

The area is one of the city's most historic and culturally significant neighborhoods. The site of some of Houston's original recorded deeds, many area residents can trace their ancestors back to some of the area's early settlers. Second Ward has a proud heritage of being a focal point in the city's twentieth century industrial expansion.

The area has maintained a strong Hispanic identity for much of the twentieth century, but historically the neighborhood has played host to several different periods of settlement by different ethnic groups. During the mid to late nineteenth century, the area was largely settled by Germans, followed by Italians and Anglos, and then by Hispanics beginning in the 1920s, gaining in numbers by the 1940s. During the early to mid-twentieth century, the area was settled largely by Hispanics of Mexican origin, but is now home to a more diverse population that hails from all over Mexico as well as Central America.

The area has undergone tremendous change in recent years. Once a thriving industrial and manufacturing hub for Houston, many of these facilities were hit hard during the recessionary 1980s. Aside from the parts of the neighborhood located within the downtown district, much of Second Ward was very rural until the turn of the twentieth century. There were few named roads to take residents to and from Second Ward into downtown, located only one to two miles away, except for Commerce, Engelke, and Harrisburg Streets.

The area was home to many farms and even a horse race track during the late nineteenth century. Many of the large farm tracts were sold for industrial use after 1900. The former site of the Volksfest Park at the head of North York was sold to the Houston Meat Packing Company, which was a large-scale meat packing and canning plant. The former site of the horse racetrack became the Milby Car Barn for the Houston Electric Railway Company which was later purchased by Metro and is now the HCC Eastside campus. During the 1920s -1950s, the area took on a distinctively Hispanic flavor due to de facto segregation in Houston. Just as Fourth Ward became a self-sustaining community for African Americans, Second Ward did the same for peoples of Hispanic heritage.

Second Ward was also home to businesses which catered to the local population and included social organizations, restaurants, bakeries, shoe stores, drug stores, and even a Spanish language radio station. Beginning in the late 1960s, the area experienced a prolonged period of decline coupled with a rising crime rate and unemployment. The problem was compounded as many of the well-established families moved away and the area's housing stock was used more frequently for income-producing purposes.

Famous or Well-Known Residents:

- William Marsh Rice, founder of Rice University, served as an alderman for Second Ward from 1855-1857.

- The Brady family - responsible for the formation of the Houston Ship Channel and the development of the Magnolia neighborhood (developed in the 1890s and zoned for residential, commercial, recreational, etc.).
- Tony Marron, a political and civic activist.
- Sgt. Macario Garcia, the country's first Hispanic Army Sargent.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

The two-story commercial building at 5804 Canal Street is approximately 7,500 square feet. It is a square-shaped Art-Moderne style wood-frame building covered in concrete block and painted stucco, with a parapet wall above the roof on all sides except the south façade. The building is situated on a concrete slab foundation. The main entrance is on the chamfered corner at the northwest corner of the building and southeast corner of Norwood and Canal Streets. The north façade (Canal St) contains three bays of aluminum storefronts on the first floor and five bays of metal casement windows on the second above an upcurved concrete canopy with beveled detailing. The canopy wraps around the corner entrance and the first bay of the west façade (Norwood St). This distinctive type of canopy was introduced in Houston in 1937 on the River Oaks Community Shopping Center designed by Nunn, McGinty and Winston.

The chamfered entrance contains an aluminum door, transom and side-lites on the first floor, and a bay of glass block surrounded by black pigmented structural glass (Vitrolite) on the second floor. The west façade contains one bay of aluminum storefront and an entrance door towards the rear on the first floor and four bays of steel casement windows on the second. The east façade contains a fire escape leading to a second story door and a series of one and two-story additions that contain mechanical equipment. The south façade contains one awning window on the first floor and on the second, a slider window, five pairs of casement windows and a series of clerestory windows. The south façade does not have the parapet wall. A pattern of four decorative diamonds above the second story windows and below the parapet is on both the north and west façades.

The building originally contained two storefronts. Material from the Harris County Archives describes the building as having a store on the first floor and a union hall on the second, with plastered and tile interior walls. At some point in the 1960s, the original plate glass display windows were enclosed and the two storefronts were combined into a single unit. By 1970, the rear one story utility room addition was present on the east façade and sometime between 1970 and 2005, a two-story addition was built. The building was renovated in 1990 which included restoring the original first floor display windows and converting the second-floor union hall as a rental hall. Historic details, including the original metal casement windows on the second floor, retained.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation

(a) The HAHC, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

S	NA	S - satisfies	D - does not satisfy	NA - not applicable
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- ☐ ☒ (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;
- ☒ ☐ (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;
- ☐ ☒ (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;
- ☒ ☐ (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.

AND

- ☐ ☒ (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Protected Landmark Designation of the Sociedad Mutualista Obrera Mexicana Building at 5804 Canal Street.

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EXHIBIT A

PHOTO

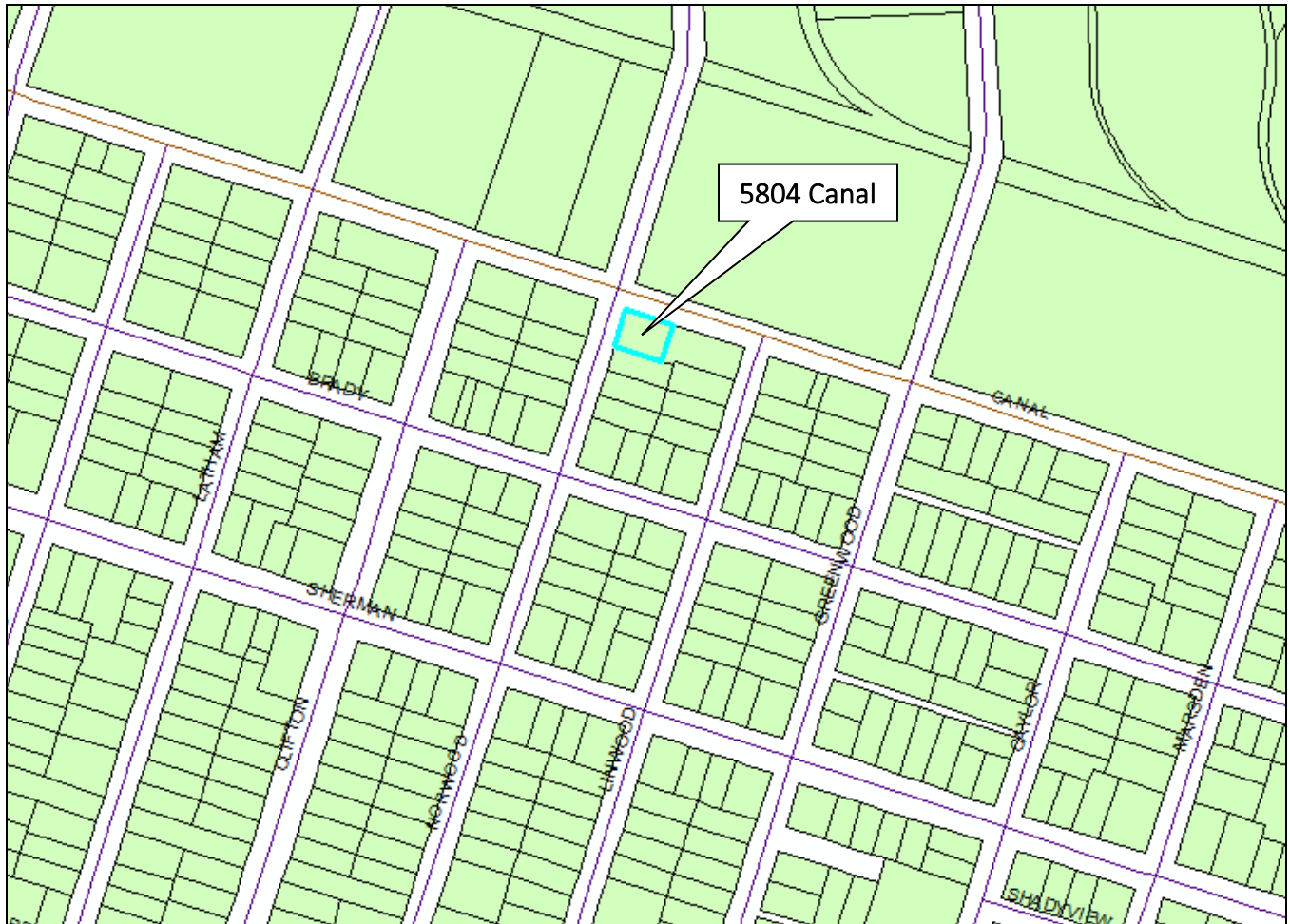
SOCIEDAD MUTUALISTA OBRERA MEXICANA (SMOM) BUILDING
5804 CANAL STREET



EXHIBIT B

SITE MAP

SOCIEDAD MUTUALISTA OBRERA MEXICANA (SMOM) BUILDING
5804 CANAL STREET



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